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Easter Sunrise Service
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John 18
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“Nothing!”

In one of his poems, Henry David Thoreau said, “We must learn to reawaken . . . with an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep.” An infinite expectation of the dawn.

There is much that a new day brings. But that is also why the dawn can be so frightening. The day is unknown. What will this particular day bring? For Mary and the other disciples it was loss, failure, sadness, defeat. Yet the dawn always comes. Even as Thoreau says, “in our soundest sleep.” The night ends. The morning always comes. And so on Easter, especially, especially on Easter, we rise early from a night’s sleep, in the pre-dawn hours, in the rain and cold, even without the beauty of the gardens, the soft dewey grass, and the smell of flowers, we rise from the darkness of Good Friday, to prepare for Easter light.

I came across an Easter story this week I’d like to share with you. It’s about a little girl and her pet turtle. When Zoe, was three years old, her pet turtle died. She cried as if her heart would break. Her mother, failing to explain death in any way that comforted Zoe, was glad when her father came home. Her father was to become the Chief Judge of the South Carolina Court of Appeals, but that day, in the face of his little girl’s tears, he did not feel very wise either.

First he suggested that we would get another turtle to replace the one that died. “But,” he says, “I got nowhere with that argument, for even at three years of age, Zoe was smart enough to know that there is a certain non-transferability about living things. A turtle is not a toy, and Zoe’s tears continued.”

Finally, in desperation, I said, “I tell you what; we’ll have a funeral for the turtle.”

Well, she was only three and didn’t know what a funeral was, so I tried to explain. “A funeral is a great festival in honor of the turtle.” Well, she didn’t know what a festival was either. “Okay,” I said, “a funeral is like a birthday party. We’ll have ice cream and cake and lemonade and balloons, and all the children in the neighborhood will come over to our house to play; all because the turtle has died.”

That finally dried her tears and she returned to her happy smiling self. Not only happy, but now excited at the prospect of what was going to happen because the turtle had died. Then, an unforeseen thing happened. Suddenly, the turtle began to move. He wasn’t dead after all. He began to creep away, as lively as ever. Now I really didn’t know what to say, but Zoe did. “Daddy,” she said looking up at me, “Daddy, let’s kill it.”

Zoe has made the logical connection that we all make. We live in a world based on law and rationality. Things that are dead stay dead. They don’t get up and walk about. If Zoe was going to have a funeral, a celebration with ice-cream, friends, and balloons, the turtle needed to be dead.

Mary Magdalene is the heroine of this morning's scripture. While it is still dark, she goes to the tomb. There she discovers that stone has been rolled away. Mary, living in a natural, rational world where dead things stay dead, assumes that someone has taken the body. Peter, and the disciple whom Jesus loved, come to her side. Peter stoops outside the tomb and does a quick forensic analysis of the scene. Linen wrappings over there. Cloth that covered Jesus head over here. No body. The two disciples leave without a word. Mary Magdalene stays, older and wiser than little Zoe, she is in no mood to celebrate a death. In front of the tomb, alone in the breaking dawn, Mary weeps. She weeps over the loss of a loved one, her loneliness, the loss of her broken dreams. And that is when he comes to her. The first person the resurrected Christ meets is one who is weeping, and that is how it usually works. Through her tears she doesn't even recognize Jesus when they speak, mistaking him at first for the gardener whom she hoped would help her find the lost body. As he was in life, Jesus remains hard for her to pin down.

Even for his followers, his disciples, like Mary. Even for those who have walked with him, or at least gave it the good old college try, through his passion and death, who had heard him say the "Son of Man will be killed and rise again on the Third Day." Even for those who love him like Mary and Peter, even for disciples like us, the Resurrection is still almost un-recognizable. Mary and Peter live in the same world we do. Despite the benefit of the enlightenment that sealed our devotion to rational thinking and natural law, Mary and Peter knew that dead things don't rise; corpses don't move themselves.

But Easter isn't logical. It's not rational. It doesn't conform. Mary doesn't recognize Jesus, but Jesus sees her. Mary can't find Jesus, but he finds her, in her sadness and loneliness and grief. The Resurrected Christ calls her by name.

On Easter morning, death no longer triumphs in the land of the living. Life no longer conforms to our worn out weary rational ways of thinking where dead things stay dead. This is how the resurrection works. Despite all the evidence at hand, peace will defeat the power of war, justice will overcome injustice, right will triumph over wrong, joy will win the day against grief. The linen wrappings and bloody head cloth thrown about in the tomb do not tell the whole story. All the evidence is not in. The miracle of Easter is that the Resurrected Lord obliterates the doors that contain death, and then, calls each one by name.

The preacher, Fred Craddock, woke up to the phone ringing. It was early, the sun had yet to rise in the Eastern sky. Come quickly, pastor, the voice said. It is time. Craddock knew what was happening. Throughout his long years of ministry, he had done this many times. He rose and dressed in the darkness and then drove to the hospital to the hospital to wait for death. It would not take long now. When he arrived the family was already there. The dying woman had done her best. She had lived a good life, but the cancer had been too much. She fought the good fight, chemo, radiation, and blood transfusions she struggled and prayed and struggled some more, but the cancer was too strong.

A youthful woman of 50 would die that morning, and when Craddock entered the hospital room, the grief was overwhelming. It was not peaceful. The daughter was weeping in the corner. Her son was at the window, staring blankly into the graying dawn. Her husband was at the bedside, clutching his wife's hand. All the evidence of impending death was there. The heart monitor slowly kept time for death. Beep, beep, beep, beep.

Suddenly, the husband jumped to his feet and began to rock her weak head. The son left the window and clutched her hand, while the daughter grabbed her other hand, and Craddock completed the circle around the bed. Doctors and nurses poured into the room and joined the group. As they prayed and sang, they could hear death beating down upon them, out in the hallway, death was pounding on the door. They kept praying and death kept pounding, they kept singing, and death kept coming, her heart struggled to beat, and death kept pushing and fighting and scrapping against that door, and when she had breathed her last and death finally burst into the room . . . it had nothing!